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ABSTRACT

The resurgence of books on power points out that the fundamental issue in leadership is power. The books also compel one to look at the management of aggression and its corollary, the management of dependency. Empirical, simplistic, circumscribed cross-sectional methods are not likely to lead to a comprehensive understanding of the leadership function. Nor are they likely to help understand and predict leadership behavior or offer a valid body of knowledge for the consultative guidance of persons in leadership roles. A series of longitudinal studies of leaders or top level executives is needed. We should have comprehensive personal data and clinical evaluation to begin with. We should delineate a range of environmental, organizational, interpersonal, and behavioral variables that can be sampled at defined intervals and in times of crisis. A consortium of psychologists working in different parts of the country, even the world, using the same design and instruments, could assemble systematic behavioral data from which we could then more adequately come to understand the interactional phenomena that govern the multiple expressions of aggression that constitute the fundamentals of the leadership role. (Author/IRT)

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# THE RESURGENCE OF POWER IN ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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# THE RESURGENCE OF POWER IN ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY*

Harry Levinson

Several years ago, as is my custom, I placed a group of graduate students, who were taking my seminar in organizational diagnosis, in a small company of about 400 employees. That team of five was to formulate its own study design and carry out its study methods to arrive, by the end of the academic year, at an organizational diagnosis. They were then to feed back a summary and interpretation of their findings to the organization.

In the initial months of the study the president of the company treated the students like children. They found his attitude difficult to understand and his behavior somewhat troublesome to cope with. Although they had had limited managerial experience, they were all highly intelligent and mature graduate students who had competences and skills of their own.

About midway through the year the economic recession hit this small company with a vengeance. Almost overnight the competent and successful president found himself on the economic ropes. Much against his will he had to think of laying people off. His mother-in-law, who was also a dominant figure on his board, let him know with emphatic vigor what she thought of his managerial ability. His key subordinates complained he couldn't take hold and make decisions. The students were

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now dismayed and confused because he reversed his role relationship with them. Instead of treating them like children, he began to act like a child in his almost abject efforts to become dependent on them. They, in turn, turned to me.

"How do we understand this reversal?" they asked. "What's going on? How is it that a man like this can be head of a successful organization? What shall we tell him? How can we help him?

Unfortunately the literature of leadership, or indeed, the literature of organizational consultation, doesn't have many good answers to these questions. The work of Vroom (1973) might have given some hints on how much participation he might invite as a leader, but participation assumes that the leader himself can participate effectively as a leader and can exercise power and authority appropriately. This executive might have discerned from Vroom's model what he ought to do, but whether he could was another matter.

He might have made use of Fiedler's (1967) work to assess whether he could lead in this situation. But that wouldn't have helped him much either. He had little choice but to be the leader inasmuch as it was his company and there was no one else in it who could have taken his role. He might well have applied Argyris' (1974) Model II behavior and shared with his people his thoughts and feelings, his sense of helplessness and his fear of catastrophe. To do so would have panicked a good many of them who depended on him for stability of leadership.

Further, to have done so would have increased his vulnerability to more intense attack from the most aggressive of his three vice presidents. That man was already taking advantage of every opportunity to put the president down and to acquire his own power base. Yet he had sales skills which the president needed, particularly at this moment.

I cite this illustration not to deprecate the work of my colleagues but to give substance to the words of Porter (1976) about research on leadership. In his introduction to a symposium on which these psychologists appeared, he said, "This pre-eminent work does not deal with leadership as a whole and leaves us with only a limited number of highly circumscribed techniques with which to understand, predict and guide executive behavior." Mintzberg (1976) comments, "It is ironic that despite an immense amount of research, managers and researchers still know virtually nothing about the essence of leadership, about why some people follow and others lead. Leadership remains a mysterious chemistry; catchall words such as charisma proclaim our ignorance." The limits of what we know from decades of experimental research are most strikingly indicated in Stogdill's (1974) exhaustive summary of leadership theories and studies. It is my thesis in this paper that it is time we studied leadership.

The Futility of the Periphery

As with other fields of study, efforts to cope with the issue of leadership have been characterized by phases and waves in industrial and organizational psychology. There was great preoccupation in the late 1940's and the early 1950's

with issues of leadership and leadership selection. Two dominant strains of work came from the Institute of Social Research of the University of Michigan on the one hand, and the Ohio State leadership studies on the other (Stogdill, 1974).

These efforts eventually declined as it became apparent that a list of characteristics or general qualities like "consideration" seemed to be of little help either in the selection or training of people for leadership or power roles.

As the group dynamics movement came into being, building on the basic work of Kurt Lewin and under the influence of the National Training Laboratories, interest in power and leadership receded. The group emphasis was on processes, and power, if it existed at all in individuals, was viewed as a negative quality. Indeed, he who had wielded power was, in Douglas McGregor's (1960) terms, be definition, Theory X, or in Robert Blake's (1972) terms, 9/1.

As some people conceived of group dynamics processes, the underlying task was power to the people: participative management, group decision-making, and peer complementarities became the order of the day. If there were a leader, he was merely as among Presbyterians (and with the same difficulties), the first among equals. The tragic consequences of this kind of thinking are seen in the failure of the Topeka dogfood plant experiment (Brimm, 1975).

Then contingency theories began to assume popularity: "It all depended..." However, despite discussion about matching the personality of the leader to the situation (Lorsch and

Morse, 1974; Fiedler, 1968) not much sophisticated thinking about personality is apparent in contingency studies. The result is a continuing flow of low level correlations which leave most of the variance unaccounted for.

Into this gap there now has come a new series of books on power. These vary from Korda's (1975) book, which is essentially a modern day Machiavelli and merely advises on how to manipulate other people, to the more serious work of McClelland (1975) and Winter (1973) using experimental technique to study the power motive, to that of the Zaleznik and Kets de Vries volume (1975), applying psychoanalytic theory to published information about leaders in business and politics.

In my view, the resurgence of books on power says to us, in effect, "Stop kidding yourself. This is where the psychological action is." The fundamental issue in leadership is power. As Bender (1975) has put it, "Business remains the most accessible and the most versatile instrument for the exercise of personal power." Furthermore, she notes, "No matter how many laws are passed or how the economic climate shifts, the power of business in the United States is not curbed. If checked in one direction, it veers to another."

More importantly, in my judgment, these books compel us to look at a fundamental human fact, heavily rooted in biology, namely the management of aggression and its correlary, the management of dependency. The former has been carefully avoided in industrial and organizational psychology despite the work of our colleagues in comparative psychology. We have been

content to correlate odds and ends of peripheral behavior. Even McClelland's work suffers from this proclivity. McClelland may insist that what he is dealing with is a motive toward power. But his own correlations indicate that while many bits of behavior correlate in minor ways with his definition of power, they do not correlate with each other. Therefore he is dealing with something more fundamental than a power motive, namely the management of aggression. It is also aggression which underlies the achievement motive, moderated in a different direction for superego and ego defensive reasons.

The management of aggression is the theme of world-wide social problems. These range from issues of nuclear warfare to the rebellion of subject peoples, to crime in the streets of our own cities. Aggression in the form of a search for power have long characterized power-oriented organizational structures whose hierarchical models have dominated our society. The ancient Chinese philosopher, Yen Chih-T'ui (531-591+) (Dien,1962) advised those who would succeed as functionaries of emperors to hide in the hierarchy and to maintain the status quo. For some years that has been a valid mode of survival in organizations. But obviously that is no longer possible in organizations which must become increasingly competitive, temporary and differentiated.

Why do we have so much difficulty facing up to such a fundamental issue? There are a number of reasons.

First, historically, industrial-organizational psychology has tried to deal with aggression as if it were merely a trait which could be tapped by attitude studies or

cross-sectionally by its manifestation at a given time. The field has tried to deal with it as if it were an unmodulated given, without taking into account shifts of internal forces or those in the external or environmental network of variables, which may modulate or redirect aggression. To understand the modes of discharge of an ever-present variable, one must take slices of the environment over time, as it were, slices of role pressures over time, slices of the developing person (in the Erikson sense) over time. To study the manifestations of aggression of a given person in a leadership role in an organization, one should study slices of a given organization over time, taking into account the organization's stage of development and therefore its need for a leader to manifest certain kinds of aggressive behavior patterns at different times, or indeed, for certain kinds of leaders at different times, whose characteristic patterns of aggressive expression fit organizational requirements, e.g., the technical leader, the charismatic leader, the mediative leader.

Stogdill (1974) notes that there is a scarcity of research that tests the interaction of leader personality, values, and behaviors with follower personality, values and behaviors and the effect of such interaction on the group. He notes also that, "One frequently encounters the statement in the literature that all forms of person-oriented behavior are identical in character and that all forms of task-oriented behavior are merely variants of authoritarianism. The research reviewed in chapters 32-37 indicate that these statements are in error." He adds that "There is a dearth of

research on the interaction of leader behavior and personality with power." And he calls for more highly complex research designs which, he adds, no one person can carry out.

He bears out the point that I have been making. But it is exactly this kind of methodological thinking that I call into question. I contend that no amount of multifactorial analysis will help answer the questions that I raised in the beginning of this paper. I agree with Coser (1975) who, in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association, argued that "....the recent insistence among many sociologists on the primacy of precise measurements over substantive issues" portends lean years of "normal science with a vengeance, in which not only the mediocre minds but even the minds of the best are hitched to quotidian endeavors and routine activities."

In short, I don't think we can get there from here with the kinds of research orientations that continue to give us small but significant correlations (significant meaning statistically significant but not necessarily psychologically significant) that do not help us understand any more about the leadership function than we have in the past.

An Alternative Avenue

How do we get there from here? Perhaps we can learn something from the futility of so much research of the same kind which has gone on in the field of psychotherapy. Apropos that field, Appelbaum (1975) points out that the formal research in that field is unconvincing. It not only results in contradictory conclusions but the problems inherent

in such research make it difficult to believe that definitive and consistent answers could be forthcoming. He points out that psychotherapy (like leadership) is an intensely idiosyncratic enterprise to which different people can be expected to react in different ways. He notes that diagnostic categories are not enough as bases for comparison of populations because there is no agreement about diagnostic categories and, besides they are too gross to respond to the questions asked about the effectiveness of psychotherapy. In measuring effect, the outcome may depend significantly on the different points in their own illnesses or personal histories from which people started. Effectiveness for whom is always a question and that "whom" is the unique combination of many characteristics. Furthermore the personality of the therapist is as significant as his techniques. His level of training, individual differences in skill and the match between therapist and patient or client are all significant and complex issues which are rarely dealt with in psychotherapy research. The same could be said of leadership research with respect to followers, groups, organizations, or even nations.

Appelbaum goes on to add that much psychotherapy research errs in using experimental designs which are modeled on testing the effectiveness of medicine. "Psychotherapy is not like aspirin, a homogeneous product to be dispensed in a standard way. The psychotherapeutic transaction is one of a kind, taking place in a particular way between a particular patient and a particular therapist and only once." He observes that outcomes may vary because, while for some

people relief of symptoms is important, for others a change in the quality of life or self-knowledge or feelings about themselves in their relationships with others, and their effectiveness in various life tasks are important.

A critical issue is at what point in time does one measure the effectiveness of psychotherapy? A significant effect may occur a long time after the psychotherapy is finished. "In probably no other body of research is the independent variable less homogeneous and specifiable than in research on the effectiveness of psychotherapy," he notes.

There are differences in time, technique, therapies and theories and, indeed, changes are brought about by factors not specified in a theory or self-consciously employed in practice. He goes on to say, "If indeed general reliability and validity are so difficult to arrive at because of the uniqueness of each psychotherapeutic endeavor, then examination of the single cases may be the research design appropriate to the problem." He calls for a number of clinicians working with individual cases to systematize and collect their observations.

It is my contention that the same issues apply to leadership research. Empirical, simplisitc, circumscribed cross sectional methods, often using populations which are called leaders only in the most temporary and tenuous sense, are not likely to lead to a comprehensive understanding of the leadership function. Nor are they likely to help us understand and predict leadership behavior or offer us a validated body of knowledge for the consultative guidance of persons in leadership roles. Reconstructions from biographies and public data

leave many deceived. Post hoc theorizing always leaves us open to too many alternative hypotheses.

In the first chapter of The Unconscious Conspiracy, Bennis (1976) uses two cases of executive suicide to illustrate the kinds of pressures which contributed to their demise. In one of those cases he had to rely on newspaper reports. I knew that executive quite well and some of the struggles he had experienced. The crucial psychological issues were not those reported in the press. Reconstruction from such data has its problems.

I am presently engaged in a psychological autopsy of another executive who died prematurely from natural causes. It is already clear from the interviews and from those which Bennis reports in the first of his illustrations, that even with multiple informants there are gaps which now cannot be filled.

Nevertheless, Bennis' illustrations and his reports of his own experiences, those detailed cases in Fortune, Business Week, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and in other books, tells us more about leadership in vivo than 50 years of cross-sectional research.

I think what we now need is a series of longitudinal studies of leaders or top level executives in action. We should have comprehensive personal data and clinical evaluation to begin with. We should delineate a range of environmental, organizational, interpersonal and behavioral variables which can be sampled at defined intervals and in times of crisis. A consortium of psychologists working in different parts of the

country, even the world, using the same design and instruments, could assemble systematic behavioral data from which we could then more adequately come to understand the interactional phenomena which govern the multiple expressions of aggression which constitute the fundamentals of the leadership role.

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